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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the school board as a player in school "restructuring." Defining restructuring as the transformation of schools into equitable learning environments, this paper examines whether school boards have a leadership role in restructuring. Data were derived from a literature review, a questionnaire of individual board members and intact boards, a case study of a rural county board, and personal experience. The following barriers to the school board in assuming a leadership role are identified: (1) the board's function is ambiguous; (2) board members lack knowledge about new teaching and learning conceptions; (3) board processes are reactive rather than proactive; (4) board members act individually; (5) boards do not necessarily represent the general public; (6) the board's relationship with its superintendent is often unbalanced; (7) board members have no independent sources of information; and (8) boards serve symbolic purposes. A conclusion is that the school board is a conservative, symbolic institution that furthers the belief in local control by engaging in rituals that uphold the status quo. The board as a whole is not structured to provide leadership for change. Boards, leadership, and restructuring are therefore incompatible terms. (LMI)

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The National Center for Educational Leadership (NCEL) Symposium:
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SCHOOL BOARDS AND SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

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SCHOOL BOARDS AND SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

The research world does not yet know much about the practice of school boards. The literature on school boards offers empirical and theoretical considerations about the purposes, characteristics, limitations, and problems of school boards, as well as countless "how-to" manuals filled with advice for effective boardsmanship. Researchers have examined relationships between boards and their superintendents, but they have not examined in depth the relations amongst board members or between boards and their publics. This paper does not offer results from a specific study of school boards, but we do hope to contribute a set of grounded ideas about the functions and activities of school boards. We have chosen to link three concepts: Leadership; School Restructuring; and School Boards. How are these concepts related, or is this linking a contradiction in terms?

School restructuring and school boards are seldom discussed in the same conversation. Michael Kirst in the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force Report on School Governance (1992) pointed out that boards are the largest losers of influence in the education reform of the past decades. Because the reform movements of the eighties and nineties began as federal or state initiatives, the local board essentially has been left out of restructuring. Federal or state funding of much of the reform efforts has also excluded local boards from fiscal decisions about restructuring. The board's role seems to have been confined to the implementation of policies or programs mandated from above. Some critics have even suggested that the local school board is a hindrance or barrier to true school restructuring, that under the auspices of protecting local values, boards undermine change for improvement. A recent survey of Board presidents and administrators in Illinois confirms the opinion that board members are often impediments to change (Illinois Association of School Boards, 1993).

Still, the local school board, because it is in a position to define and establish the culture of the local schools, can be seen as having an important leadership role in the reform movement. Furthermore, almost any board member, when asked why he or she sought a position on a school board, will talk of a desire to play a leadership role in improving the conditions of learning for children. The question for this paper is whether local school boards can and do actually perform that role. Evidence from our on-going studies of school boards suggests that while the intent is to provide leadership, boards lack vision and the necessary processes to articulate the vision to be leaders in school restructuring.

This paper examines the school board as a player in school restructuring. Since we use specific meanings for leadership and restructuring, we begin by defining our terms. Then, drawing from the literature and our own research, we

offer perspectives on the role and structure of the school board in theory and in practice. Finally, we seek a fit between leadership, the restructuring agenda, and the activities of the local school board. A caveat we want to clarify at the outset is that our purpose is not to attack school boards or to build a case for the elimination of the local school board. Rather, out purpose is to describe and analyze the practice of boards to enhance understanding of their operation.

Our Perspective of Leadership and Restructuring

In our definition, leadership requires vision as well as processes for achieving the vision. What differentiates a leader from a manager is the leader's articulation of a vision for the organization (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The leader shares this vision, which embodies a mission and goals, explicitly with the members of the organization and encourages them to embrace the vision. The leader also creates an environment that enables the vision to be realized. Rallis (1990) views leadership as transactive, as a "dynamic process drawing members of an organization together to articulate and pursue what they want to become" (p. 186). Both views support the construct of leadership as the creation of a framework for the actualization of the organizational mission.

In our view, the presence of an overall guiding vision also differentiates restructuring from reform (see for example, Shanker, 1989; Schlecty,1990). Reform focuses on school improvement efforts, taking a step by step, program by program approach. Reform efforts are thus more reactive than proactive since they tend to address problems separately, rather than as a whole. Restructuring, on the other hand, is driven by a vision for transforming schooling. More than seeking to correct a school's problems, restructuring seeks to transform the whole system. School restructuring, then, requires leadership and vision.

School leaders deal with complex, loosely coupled organizations (see Weick, 1976) with multiple goals and diverse technologies -- all of which they must wrap into a compelling vision. One such vision for restructured schools includes a focus on equity – making schools places where all students can learn. Equity has been one of the goals that has shaped twentieth century educational policy (Mitchell & Encarnation, 1984). The standards raising era of the 1980's gave birth to equity principles that are shaping the current school restructuring era's overt attacks on issues of inequality. Murphy (1989, 1991, 1992) identifies three principles that drive the 1990's restructuring efforts to address inequalities: the *educability of all students principle; the school accountability principle; and the equity through integration principle.* The restructuring vision we have chosen to focus on is a new conception of schooling that emphasizes teaching and learning as a process that can meet the needs of all children (see appendix for further definition of these principles.).

In sum, a new attitude toward teaching and learning has established itself as a vision for school restructuring. An equitable school is one that provides access to favorable conditions of learning for all students (Murphy, 1991, 1992). Specific areas addressed in this vision are desegregation, finance formulas aimed to balance the distribution of wealth, the elimination of tracking and use of alternative assessment strategies, and the growth of the inclusion movement in special education. Each of these areas have appeared in current federal or state reform packages.

The question for this paper is: Where do school boards fit in restructuring that seeks to transform schools into equitable learning environments? Can and do school boards have a leadership role in restructuring? What is the relationship between the school board and the school's ability to ensure all students access to favorable learning conditions? If our evidence is accurate in indicating that school boards lack vision and the necessary processes to articulate the vision, boards are not the leaders who ensure all students access to favorable learning conditions.

Perspectives on Local School Boards

Our views on the local school board have several bases, some empirical, some theoretical, and some experiential. We have reviewed the literature on boards and the "how-to" manuals from board associations. We have administered the Leadership Orientation Questionnaire based on the four organizational frames described by Bolman and Deal, (1991) to a sample of board members as well as to several intact boards, and have analyzed the results. We are conducting a case study of a rural county board using interviews, observations, and record review. Finally, we have a depth of experience working with boards: as co-director of the 1991 Peabody at Vanderbilt Schoolboard Chairpersons' Institute, as a program evaluator who was often contracted to report to boards, and as an elected member of a local school board for eight years. This broad base of study and experience shapes our perspectives on boards and leadership.

The board's function is ambiguous

The first barrier to assuming a leadership role is the ambiguity inherent in the understood purpose of the board; local school boards do not have clearly defined or consistent roles. While most sources agree that boards exist to make policy, few agree on how or on what policy. Boards use *executive power* when they enter into personnel or service contracts; they employ *legislative authority* when they approve rules and regulations necessary to carry out policies they have adopted; they function in a *quasi-judicial* manner when hearing appeals resulting from the implementation of their policies (Russo, 1992, p.12). A School Board Handbook of 1966 states that "... the board's job is governance and oversight", yet boards are frequently accused of micro-managing. For example, the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance (1992) has referred to schools boards as collective

management committees instead of policy making bodies. Board members themselves recognize the tenuousness of the link between policy making and their actions: "Sometimes we have a policy to follow; sometimes we don't; sometimes we have the policy, but we don't follow it anyway" (school board member in Rallis, 1992).

The ambiguity in the perceived and actual role of school boards began early in the history of schools. Since colonial times,the local school board has been charged with establishing the learning environment for the community's children (Dexter, 1904).Two common images, one of a local board member dismissing the schoolmaster in Anne of Green Gables for giving too much attention to one female student and another of Laura's (of the Little House books) father, Charles Ingalls, checking out the school teacher in the town on the prairie, support the role of board members as protectors of the community's youth. In early days, the board had wide latitude to make and implement policy. However, school board power and autonomy eroded as state and federal influence increased (see Wirt & Kirst, 1982). From the state's point of view today, the local government is seen as primarily a translator of federal and state mandates into local policy. The local board members, however, consider their allegiance to their constituencies (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1985); thus, they often lack the will and capacity to support federal and state mandates (Odden & Marsh, 1990). Hence, the school board is a body which legally serves as an agent of the state legislature, but politically serves to represent the local citizens who have elected it.

The ambiguity of the job is exacerbated by the lack of induction procedures. Michael Resnick of the National School Boards Association(NSBA) tells that when he first sat on his board, even after several years working at NSBA, he looked around and asked himself, "Now what do I do? I decided to watch the others and do what they do" (story told by Resnick in his presentation at the 1993 AERA Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia). When we interviewed board members about how they learned their role, we learned that members develop their own set of understandings based upon what they hear from friends, other board members, family members who had served on boards, and from the superintendent.

Board members lack knowledge about new conceptions of teaching and learning

Confusion about what is the boards role may be either the cause or the result of the board's lack of vision. Boards do not have shared and articulated visions of precisely what is in the best interest of children and how to provide access to favorable learning conditions for all children. Because board members are laypersons who may not have substantive exposure, much less training, about the new understandings of the cognitive processes involved in thinking and learning (see for example, Caine & Caine, 1991 or Marzano, 1992), they may hold outdated beliefs about best practices. While most have endorsed district mission statements which embrace some version of the educability of all students principle, members

have not developed a shared meaning of how this principle looks in practice. Individual board members tend not (and do not have time allocated) to thrash out together exactly what schools should look like and on what technologies are needed to get there. Without a shared vision that can guide their actions, boards have difficulty forging a plan for educating all children and for taking responsibility for this process.

This absence of a cohesive philosophy of education leads to piecemeal adoption of programs. Ignoring the changed social, economic, and ethnic fabric of today's student body, as well as unaware of emerging conceptualizations of the teaching and learning process based upon newly acquired knowledge about cognition, boards seem to adopt programs individually with no glue making them work together. Many board members feel as this one: "These programs look like what I had in school -- it seems good enough for my kid" (stated during a strategic planning training session for a local board held August, 1991). Approaching education program by program ignores the equity through integration principle and stands in the way of true restructuring. Without understanding of the foundations of the inclusion movement, for example, board members express concern for and often resist efforts to integrate children with handicaps in regular classrooms.

Board processes are reactive rather than proactive

Without a guiding vision or philosophy, boards tend to be reactive rather than proactive. "We don't really determine our own agenda -- things get brought to us", said a board member in an interview from our case study (Rallis, 1992). Issues tend to be considered on an ad hoc basis rather than in the context of defined goals and objectives and without in-depth staff analysis (Report of an Evaluation of the Seattle Public Schools, Washington State House of Representatives, 1990). With no consistent focus or philosophy grounded in an understanding of the provision of quality education, boards are driven by the interests of particular constituencies of individual board members or by externally established parameters. Leuker(1992) notes that boards are especially sensitive to the uninformed criticisms of their public. Special interest groups and collective bargaining units dominate and prevent all voices from being heard equally (Zeigler & Jennings, 1974).

A dominant voice is the taxpayer. While each member interviewed for our case study talked about meeting kids' educational needs, the "bottom line" was always in their minds. "How much will this cost the taxpayer?" is a common question concerning almost any issue. Even a cursory view of the videotapes of meetings of our case study board reveals the press of this question.The press of cost tends to keep the board as a whole a conservative body. While as individuals, members may support innovations which require new materials or new building projects or smaller class sizes, as a board,they recognize that these changes require additional funds. Thus, when the board comes together to vote, they tend not to support such changes if the taxpayer will view the cost as too great. For example, a

board member opposed the cost of roof repairs because, "farmers are having to sell their land to pay for taxes, and I'm not willing to sit here and ask for more money from them" (Criscoe, 1993). In other decisions, fiscal accountability motivates the monitoring of student progress more than a need to take responsibility for student learning through the school accountability principle. The high rate in some states of adoption of the inclusion (of children with disabilities into regular classrooms) movement, for example, may be due in part to perceived monetary savings by board members; at the same time, the incomplete renovation of schools into barrier-free environments for handicapped children is attributed to the high and often not reimbursable costs of renovations. In sum, questions of restructuring and equity take a back seat to questions concerning money on a daily basis.

The courts, the executive branch, and legislatures are sources of externally established parameters to any restructuring efforts. For example, federal rulings on desegregation and on first amendment rights define who goes to which school and how they get there, and what is or is not included in curriculum and on library shelves. State court rulings have reconfigured school finance systems that they have declared to discriminate against the poor (e.g., Serrano v. Priest, 1971). Federal policy standards for curriculum goals and assessment establish local tracking and testing practices. Federal laws on educating children with disabilities have shaped classrooms and the services provided within those classrooms. State funding regulations have placed severe limits on the appropriation and allocation of funds (consider, for example, the effects of Proposition 2 1/2 in Massachusetts or 13 in California). Restructuring, then, is defined outside the local board.

Board members act individually

According to the Report on the Evaluation of the Seattle Schools, boards are structured to function essentially as groups of individual decision-makers (Washington State House of Representatives, 1990), influenced by their respective constituencies. The report adds that the procedure for allowing parent and other citizen involvement reflects the dysfunctional meeting structure. Since boards do not act as one, the board cannot demonstrate leadership.

Board members are usually elected or appointed to represent a specified jurisdiction; even if they are elected at large, they still recognize some sub-constituency. Despite state and association efforts to offer and even require training, training is an unsystematic and individual effort. Seldom does an intact board experience training as a group. Furthermore, few formal or informal mechanisms to transmit shared meanings across board members are used. This lack of induction or socialization reinforces the observation that the board is merely a body of individual decision-makers. Because they have no effective socialization, they cannot come together to act as a team.

Following this image of boards, then, decision making within boards follows

a pluralistic model more often than a unitary model (Wirt & Kirst, 1982). Pluralistic decisions show little commonality among the group members who are attempting to protect their own interests, whether they be desegregation issues or funding a computer lab. Were boards to have developed cohesive philosophies and shared visions, they could operate under the unitary model which reflects a level of interaction amongst the members because of their shared understandings. Instead, board members attribute their behavior to allegiance to their constituencies. In practice, they act according to their own beliefs. For example, the same board member who would not vote for school roof repairs did, at the same meeting, support renovations to the central office because he wanted to"give the community something to be proud of" (Criscoe, 1993).

Boards do not necessarily represent the general public

Local elections do not guarantee that the population is represented in school governance. People do not vote in board elections (voter turnout is typically between 7 to 15% of registered voters) and people do not know what they are voting for (the 1986 Institute for Educational Leadership study of school boards revealed massive public ignorance about the actual role and activities of school boards). Furthermore, we know that boards, which are still predominately white and male, do not look like America.

The electoral process erroneously assumes a "unitary community voice" in a pluralistic society. In an analysis of 22 significant studies on community involvement in school board policy formulation, Zerchykov (1984) found that board opinions and actions reflect the elite and professional opinion more often than the general public's opinion and that boards are least likely to express their constituents' preferences in making policy decisions. Brown (1985) also found that the school board tends to reflect the wishes of school personnel more than those of the public. The question of "who governs?" may be informed by the question of "who has access to modify the governance, under what conditions, and how?" (Wirt & Kirst, 1982, p. 132).

Even the popular belief that the public has open access to decision is a myth. While meetings are open to the public and are the primary vehicle for communication between the school and the public, public attendance at meetings is generally low. Those who do attend come with the intent of applying pressure for a specific reason. Attendance is usually motivated by one of the following reasons: personal interest in one agenda item; controversy surrounding a particular agenda item; and a kind of voyeur-ism based on the perception that observers will see the "real" school decisions being made there (AASA, 1984). Interactions at the meetings are often dysfunctional, with board members and the public openly berating each other and the staff (Washington State House of Representatives, 1990).

The board's relationship with its superintendent is often unbalanced

Another barrier to board leadership is the ambiguous relationship between the superintendent and the board. Although the board generally hires and fires the superintendent, boards and superintendents often disagree on specific implications of policies and who should call the shots -- the professionals or the lay board (James, 1967; Lortie, 1987; Trotter & Downey, 1989). The development of district structure at the turn of the century began this erosion of board influence and power in school governance. Early school committees set policy and managed the local school. As cities and towns grew and enrollments increased, communities housed more than one school. The position of superintendent was created to take on managerial and supervisory functions (Lortie, 1990). Formal powers of the board as distinct from the superintendent were seldom redefined, leading to some ambiguity and tension about the two roles. In theory, the board makes policy and the superintendent implements it. In practice, the roles and responsibilities are not so clearly delineated. Expectations and authority lines are unclear, and conflict often arises (Alvey, 1985; Guthrie & Kirst, 1988; Grady and Bryant, 1992).

Despite the role confusion, the superintendent is, for most board members, the primary source of information. Board members report that they look to the superintendent for information regarding laws and regulations, trends and problems, for national policy issues, and local referenda (IASB, 1989; Wirt & Kirst, 1982). Controlling information, the superintendent, then, dominates board policy-making (see Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). A member of our case study board notes that since the superintendent brings the decisions to be made to the board, he controls the agenda (Rallis, 1992). A survey of 2, 197 school board presidents indicated that the board is a mere rubber stamp for the superintendent (Feistritzer, 1989). In this scenario, the board is not the initiator of reform that will ensure access to favorable learning conditions for all students.

Board members have no independent sources of information

The level of responsibility a board assumes and the nature of its decision making seems to be determined by its access to information (Rallis, 1992). Much of the board's efforts are directed toward getting sufficient and accurate information for decision making. Since board members are laypersons, they are dependent on sources beyond themselves for information. Aside from the superintendent, board members report that they listen to parent organizations and teacher groups and to their constituencies (Wirt & Kirst, 1982). As representatives for various interest groups, these constituencies bring slanted information. Were the work of boards truly limited to policy making, board members need not be dependent on information for making their judgements (Yankelovitch, 1991). However, because school boards perform, in practice,both management and governance functions, they continue to need information, and they continue to struggle for adequate information.

Boards serve symbolic purposes

Both Leuker (1992) and Rallis (1992) describe the board as taking on a symbolic role in its community. Boards typically consist of a body of independent members involved in little or no socialization who come together merely for the purpose of conducting board business. Sharing no mutually established set of values or beliefs, they engage in the ritual activity of holding meetings where they assimilate information and make and vote upon motions. The only meaning shared by the whole board may lie in the importance of appearance through ritual. Members perceive themselves as "community helpers" (Leuker, 1991) more than as politicians; thus, a component of the ritual is listening and responding to community needs as expressed at the meeting. If the community does not articulate needs around the equity principles, the board will directly address equity issues only when the federal or state government bring them.

One might see the culture of the school board as a conservative one, designed to maintain the status quo, not to "rock the boat". A metaphor for the board might be as a filter, sifting out the chunks that would alter the consistency of school operations and values. Another view of the board might be as receivers and placers, taking in what is brought and modifying it to fit into the appropriate slot. Because the positions are political by nature, board members cannot be gatekeepers; they must receive everything and find a spot for it or modify it to fit.

Board meetings become rituals, that is, systematic and programmed routines, where immediate needs are addressed and special concerns are brought to them for consideration. Members do not appear to define their work; rather, their work is defined for them through the ritual of the meeting. The ritual makes sense to the members because it is predictable in that, while each issue is unique in itself, the issues fall into similar categories - such as discipline, personnel matters, building concerns. The equity principles may fall through the cracks because no simple categories exist for "the educability of all children".

The ritual also serves to verify the board's meaning - they are a body to which the public can come with complaints and concerns. Through them, the public can be assured that their complaints and concerns will be addressed by folks whom they believe represent their values. This board of lay citizens symbolizes a kind of buffer between the public and its schools so that the professionals within may continue to make decisions in the interest of students based on their body of knowledge about teaching and learning. Since the board is a symbol protection and help, we can believe that all the children have access to favorable conditions of learning.

Boards, Leadership, and Restructuring

From our literature review, our work with boards, and our studies of boards,

we find that the ambiguity resulting from the history and development of school boards may limit its role in taking responsibility for restructuring schools. Boards lack the vision to define what is a school with a favorable learning environment for all children. A set of shared values, which would seem to help in the board process of developing a vision, does not seem to have been articulated; values simply are those which may already be in place and are identified by the group or individual bringing the problem of issue. We found that the culture of the local school board is not strong and future-directed with a defined mission; rather, it is present-oriented, more reactive than proactive, limiting its ability to initiate or support restructuring.

In addition, ambiguity in role differentiation between the state and local governments and between superintendents and boards may have created a board paralysis in making policy decisions. Boards may not have access to knowledge about and understanding of the diverse environment they serve. As reactive agencies with no strong shared vision of the future, they run the danger of falling to the manipulation of special interest groups. If they respond to special interest groups without an over-arching plan, they ignore the equity principles behind restructuring schools to serve all children. Thus, they do not take a leadership role in restructuring schools.

In sum, because the local school board lacks a shared vision for improvement, and its processes inhibit the enactment of any such vision, the board as a whole does not have a leadership function. Rather, the school board is a conservative symbolic institution. An institution is an established set of practices organized around a specific purpose. The purpose of the school board institution is to further the belief in local control by engaging in a pretense that the community has a voice and of protecting the ideal of what school should be. The activities of the institution are the rituals embedded in the meetings and elections.The ritual serves to reassure the public that decisions are being made according to public wishes to keep the schools running smoothly. As long as the rituals are intact, the status quo is preserved, and change is avoided! Thus, as a conservative symbolic institution, the school board is not structured to provide leadership for change. Restructuring, which implies leadership and vision and transformation of the status quo, is not a school board activity. Boards, leadership, and restructuring, then, are not compatible terms.

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